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TAGS: [PREL](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: NEA A/S WELCH APRIL 24 MEETING WITH FOREIGN
MINISTER MAMBERTI

REF: Vatican 0074

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Charge d'affaires a.i.,
EXEC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. NEA A/S Welch met Holy See FM Mamberti April 24.

Welch urged Mamberti to consider sending a papal envoy to Lebanon and to press Patriarch Sfeir to be as active as possible. Welch expressed concern about the situation in Palestinian areas, the unhelpful role of Syria, and recent bombings in Algeria. He also raised the Pope's recent remarks about Iraq, which -- in focusing only on the negative -- did not reflect the positive developments in that country. Mamberti parried on Lebanon, complained about Israeli foot-dragging in talks on the bilateral Fundamental Agreement, and seemed regretful but not convinced with regard to Iraq. A/S Welch's visit was helpful in reaching out to Mamberti, who has kept a low profile to date, and USG would benefit from following up on Mamberti's willingness to continue the dialogue. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch, accompanied by Charge d'affaires, called April 24 on Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States (i.e., foreign minister). Deputy Legal Advisor Jonathan Schwartz also attended; Mamberti was accompanied by Monsignor Franco Coppola, the Office Director for Middle East affairs.

Lebanon

[1](#)3. (C) Welch noted that Patriarch Sfeir would be in Rome this week, and commented on potential outcomes to the current confused situation in Lebanon. The worst such outcome, though unlikely, would be an extension of President Lahoud's term. In order to ensure the best possible result, Welch said the Holy See should press Sfeir to be as active as possible in uniting the Christian community in the right way. The Patriarch must be careful, but his influence over the entire country is significant. Lebanon is at a crossroads, trying to overcome Syria's remaining influence and to firm up its democracy. A good, pro-reform Maronite president is essential. Welch added that the USG does not seek to choose the president, but rather urges that a good candidate be found.

[1](#)4. (C) Mamberti stressed that the Holy See has been and remains very interested in Lebanon, noting that Pope Benedict XVI has often addressed the situation there. The Holy See is very concerned about the Christian population. It is not easy to know what to do under the circumstances, with the community so divided. Rome has considered seriously the idea of sending an envoy, but it remains unclear whether this is the right choice at this time. Mamberti said the solution must come from the Lebanese themselves. He agreed that the President must be a leader with recognized credibility within his own community in

order to be effective more broadly.

15. (C) Welch pressed again on the question of an envoy, saying that regional and international support for Lebanon is crucial; the country has suffered a loss of confidence and fears its neighbors. Let us not leave them alone, he urged. Sfeir will certainly play a political role, in his own way; he too needs to feel protected. The USG is not anti-Syria, rather we are pro-Lebanon. Mamberti promised to talk to Sfeir during his stay in Rome.

Israeli/Palestinian

16. (C) Welch expressed concern about the internal situation of the Palestinians, with signs of anti-American and anti-Christian feeling becoming evident -- suggestive of a breakdown in order. The authorities do not have control. The USG is working hard and will continue to do so; Olmert and Abbas have improved their relationship. The Palestinians need support, but Israel too must feel a part of the region. Welch praised the recent Saudi initiative as a result of growing international desire to reduce conflict in the Middle East and build towards a solution.

17. (C) Mamberti acknowledged the importance of US leadership in this area, and asked about Syria. Welch described strained US diplomatic relations with Syria, and the disappointment of President Bush at Syria's failure to respond appropriately to changes in the region. Syria continues to facilitate entry of insurgents into Iraq and Damascus is the only Arab capital with a declared, open relationship with terrorists -- elsewhere public opinion has moved Arab countries away from terrorism. Mamberti agreed that this was 'strange'.

Algeria

18. (C) Mamberti asked about recent bombings in Algeria. Welch described them as very disturbing, observing that the US is actually Algeria's largest trading partner. He decried the prevalence of jihadi influence, which in some ways resembled the environment in Iraq. Algerian authorities are not in control.

Israel

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19. (C) Asked about the Holy See's relations with Israel, Mamberti promptly launched a discussion of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement, ratified but never enacted by Israel. He complained that there had been little or no progress in the ensuing fourteen years, right up to the most recent development at the end of March -- i.e., the last-minute postponement by Israel of a major negotiating meeting. (Mamberti said this meeting may be rescheduled for May 21.) Mamberti also commented on the recent 'Shoah' incident in which the Papal Nuncio initially declined to attend a Yad Vashem commemoration because of an inappropriate display on Pope Pius XII. Mamberti said he didn't want to imply that bilateral relations with Israel were lacking, citing for example the very active Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, but 'we'd like more progress'.

Iraq

10. (C) Referring to the Pope's Easter message (in which he said "nothing good is coming out of Iraq") Mamberti pointed out that the Pope's statement made no reference to the United States. Somewhat ill at ease, he also downplayed the importance of "just a few words on Iraq" in a much longer document. He went on to bring up the issue of the Chaldean seminary (reftel) occupied by US forces in Iraq, closure of other religious facilities, and the attempt to build a wall between communities in Iraq -- a "negation of the idea of coexistence". Mamberti said the Holy See felt sadness about developments in Iraq. Welch noted that the Pope's remarks, coming at about the same time as Saudi criticism of the US role in Iraq, had received considerable political play in the US. He assured Mamberti that the situation of the Chaldean seminary was being resolved, and that

the US forces would depart.

Comment

¶11. (C) Although Mamberti did not commit to sending an envoy to Lebanon, this meeting was important in bringing together a senior USG official with Mamberti, who -- still fairly new and tentative in his position -- has kept a low profile since taking office last fall. It was helpful to ask about Israel, and anything further we can do to encourage the Israelis to move ahead on the Fundamental Agreement will be extremely welcome to the Holy See. On Iraq, Mamberti's discomfort suggests he wishes the Pope's statement had been more carefully phrased; but while he regretted the media reaction, he gave no sign that the Holy See's thinking on Iraq would change soon. Mamberti's mention of the Chaldean seminary marks the first time the Holy See has raised the issue with us, and suggests that the matter may weigh on his mind. At the close of the meeting, Mamberti agreed with Welch that it would be good to remain in touch; we should take advantage of this opening.

¶12. (U) A/S Welch did not clear this cable.
ROONEY